

## Reappraising the Survival Question: Why We Should Focus on Interest Group Organizational Form and Careers

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Since Mancur Olson's groundbreaking work on collective action, interest group scholars have paid substantial attention to the question of how interest groups form.<sup>1</sup> They have, however, paid relatively little attention to the question of what happens to groups *after* they form. In fact, many of them appear to assume that groups simply go on surviving. Recently this situation has begun to change, as a new cadre of interest group scholars has focused attention on the issue of group survival. These scholars, many of whom employ a population ecology (PE) approach, have questioned the extent to which groups simply "go on surviving." Some PE scholars have even made mortality an explicit focus of their attention.

Building on recent research on group survival and mortality, we push this topic further. The PE approach focuses primarily upon the question of *if* groups survive, saying very little about *how* groups survive. This is problematic. In the conclusion of their pioneering 1996 book that popularized the PE approach, Virginia Gray and David Lowery acknowledged the need for research that examines individual group histories and seeks to explain how groups survive over time.<sup>2</sup> Here we respond to Gray and Lowery's call, but we deviate from the approach used in most PE studies. Specifically, rather than asking, "Do groups survive?" we ask, "How do groups adapt to enhance their chances of survival?" and "In what organizational forms do groups survive?" We begin by taking stock of extant research on survival and then outline our basic plan for the study of group survival—a new approach that examines what happens to groups after they form. Our main argument is that the best way to address the topic of group survival is to utilize a historical case study method. We envision two types of studies in particular: (1) *life-history case studies* of individual organizations and (2) *small-n studies* of groups within the same population. Case studies enable us to examine change over time in the organizational form of individual groups, while small-*n* studies allow us to examine how organizational forms and therefore capacities vary across groups at a given point in time. Our goal

here is to outline a basic research strategy to move forward the study of group maintenance and survival.

### Background: Research on Group Survival

Early group theorists concerned themselves primarily with group formation rather than with group survival. In his classic book *The Governmental Process*, David Truman contended that social change and disturbances led to the formation of interest groups.<sup>3</sup> This notion, which rested upon the naïve proposition of more or less automatic group formation, stood as the conventional wisdom on group formation for the next decade. Truman said relatively little about group survival, seemingly assuming that a group would continue to survive until its social or economic base disbursed or shifted. This line of thought implied an almost infinite growth in the number of interest groups.

Rational-choice approaches thoroughly decimated Truman's argument. Mancur Olson argued that shared interests did *not* automatically lead to group formation.<sup>4</sup> The failure of a group to form, he argued, may reflect a lack of selective incentives rather than an absence of collective interest. In another rational-choice study, Robert Salisbury argued that group formation was a function of “entrepreneurs” who constructed incentive systems capable of attracting members.<sup>5</sup> Utilizing the basic Olsonian incentive theory framework, others have emphasized the role of patronage and benefactors in group formation.<sup>6</sup>

### The Question of Maintenance

In the wake of Olson and Salisbury, scholars of group organization began to take a close look at the related process of group survival.<sup>7</sup> The core proposition in early studies of group maintenance is that after formation, the imperative driving group leaders' actions is *organizational survival* rather than policy influence. Inherent in this argument is the vulnerability of organizations that pursue political goals—their members may not agree on these goals, or these goals may be unachievable or lose relevance over time, and politics may not be enough to attract sufficient numbers of supporters. In the face of such vulnerabilities, the stability and survival of the group is secured by managing incentives. Terry Moe summarized this general position: “The key to maintenance, then . . . rests instead with the continuing provision of an appropriate mix of political and nonpolitical inducements—where what is appropriate varies with constituency characteristics as well as the direction and success of leader efforts to influence them.”<sup>8</sup> This framework for understanding group survival identifies internal factors—principally the changing motivational preferences of members—as decisive. In

this formulation, the role of group entrepreneurs is largely determined by member preferences for selective incentives, be they material, symbolic, or political. While maintenance clearly is about survival, much scholarly discussion of maintenance overemphasizes managing incentives at the expense of more diverse considerations.

So-called “niche theories” were also developed to account for maintenance and survival. As James Q. Wilson put it: “The easiest and most prudent maintenance strategy is to develop autonomy—that is, a distinctive area of competence, a clearly demarcated and exclusively served clientele or membership, and undisputed jurisdiction over a function, service, goal, or cause.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, group leaders steer groups into “clear water” where they can operate in a noncompetitive environment. William Browne has identified the propensity for groups to limit policy competition by operating in ever-narrowing issue niches.<sup>10</sup> Groups compete for policy makers’ attention, and in this competition they differentiate themselves from other groups by specializing in particular sets of issues. A group “gains a recognizable identity by defining a highly specific issue niche for itself and fixing its specified political assets (i.e., recognition and other resources) within that niche.”<sup>11</sup>

Those familiar with group life will no doubt recognize that the scholarly work on group survival is more diverse than the term *maintenance* implies, noting that it is hard to persist as a group without engaging in both influence activities and fundraising.<sup>12</sup> The image of survival as transitioning from a political organization to some type of social or trading organization seems hard to reconcile with our everyday knowledge and observations about real-world interest groups.

## PE and the New Focus on External Variables

For the most part, scholars of group maintenance operating in the wake of Olson and Salisbury paid little attention to the question of whether or not groups actually *would* survive over time. Their apparent assumption was that groups would survive as they tinkered with incentive packages to attract support from members and/or patrons. In the 1990s, the PE approach, which focused specifically upon the vital incidents of group birth and group death, cast doubt upon this assumption.<sup>13</sup> The PE approach is too complex and variegated to summarize here. Suffice it to say that the PE approach has contributed a number of important insights about both the nature of group formation and survival and the way we should study them. Among the most important insights are the following:

First, group formation is not infinite. Empirical studies show that group populations have carrying capacities, that the number of groups forming is limited, and that many groups that successfully form do not survive.

Second, the PE approach has demonstrated the value of studying group communities and populations rather than (or in addition to) individual interest groups. PE research demonstrates that we can learn a lot about interest group formation and survival by focusing on sets of groups rather than individual organizations.

Third, PE studies have shown that both population levels and the life chances of individual groups are affected by environmentally induced population pressures. Specifically, it appears that the size and heterogeneity of a given constituency, the attention of government, and population density (that is, the number of like groups) all affect group birth and death rates.

PE studies, unlike most previous work on group maintenance, emphasize environmental forces that select out poorly adapted groups and dampen birth rates. In other words, the PE approach shifts focus from internal group variables to external variables. This approach is enormously valuable. Yet by its practitioners' own acknowledgment, the PE approach offers blunt tools to examine mortality. Survival is appraised only in terms of the dual events of group birth and death. While PE acknowledges that not all groups in a given population survive (because there is some competition for finite resources among like groups), it says very little about the ways groups overcome harsh survival pressures. On the one hand, the PE approach considers the question of survival an important one, as it assumes (guided by the ecological metaphor) that to survive, groups need to find a good "fit" with prevailing conditions. On the other hand, PE scholars marginalize the importance of studying group survival, as their perspective implies that in a given group population there is a single optimal recipe for survival and thus little diversity in organizational form across groups.

But what if this implication is incorrect? What if groups can in fact follow multiple recipes to survive difficult circumstances? This question is far from trivial. Consider, for example, a hypothetical group population that contains several groups, each of which uses a different recipe for survival. One of the groups has few if any members and as such is poorly equipped to engage in grassroots lobbying. But it is well funded and staffed by well-trained professionals; as such it is well placed to conduct research that may reframe policy questions in important ways. Another group in the population has a few million members and uses these members as assets in large-scale grassroots lobbying campaigns. These brief examples show that groups bring different (and potentially complementary) capacities to the policy process. A group's capacity, we believe, is embedded within its organizational form. Thus, a variety of forms leads to a set of groups with different sets of capacities.

In short, the PE approach does a valuable service in highlighting the importance of survival but studies survival only in terms of how it manifests in overall group numbers. For the most part PE studies fail to explore what

happens between formation and death. This is problematic because a growing body of evidence suggests that groups do not simply persist, waiting to be picked off by souring environmental conditions. Rather, adaptive change does indeed take place within groups. For example, the Consumers Union in the United States transformed itself from a radical organization seeking to regulate corporate behavior into a more conservative scientific organization dedicated primarily to disseminating information to consumers.<sup>14</sup> There is even evidence that groups in the same general field vary significantly in their form. Douglas Imig's case study of poverty action groups in the United States, for example, found nonuniform responses to the same challenging operating environment.<sup>15</sup> Imig wrote:

For one group, budget reductions forced organizational retrenchment, while for another, budget reductions led to increased fundraising and new issue domains. One group with an expanding budget shifted its policy agenda to less confrontational issues in order to maintain a stream of resources, while a second, flush with resources, employed lobbying tactics new to the social welfare sector to pursue an agenda particularly confrontational to governmental institutions.<sup>16</sup>

In all, new research suggests that contrary to the assumptions of much PE research, the *same* challenging environmental conditions prompt *different* responses. Groups do not respond to environmental pressures by simply “matching” environmentally prescribed “ideal type” forms. As interest group scholars Anthony Nownes and Allan Cigler argued, “there is no *one* road to group success.”<sup>17</sup>

### How Groups Survive

The question of *how* interest groups survive is an important one. It speaks to a number of other important questions, including the following: (1) Why do we have the particular constellation of interest groups we have instead of some other assemblage that we might imagine? (2) Why are some interests better represented by interest *groups* than others? (3) What factors affect interest groups' life chances? (4) What can a group's leader do in the face of environmental change to improve the group's chances of survival? and (5) Are group leaders who wish to ensure group survival powerless in the face of population pressures? Although scholars have addressed these questions, they have not provided adequate answers.

In what follows, we develop an approach that places such questions at the forefront. Our primary goal is to impress upon students of interest groups that when they think of “maintenance,” they should pay due attention to the “form” in which groups continue to survive. We also emphasize

the fact a group may change its “form” over the course of its life—or what we call its “career.”

### Group Careers

The first step in outlining our basic approach is to introduce the concept of the *group career*. We define *group career* as the course or projection of a group’s existence. Rather than having questions of formation and maintenance and mortality treated separately, we look at how they are linked within an overall career. To do so, it is important to recognize that contemporary groups have not necessarily always been as we find them. We ought to be curious about how they came to be as we find them, as scholars have often been in the study of political organizations generally. Many students of political parties, for example, talk of a need to focus on party “careers.”<sup>18</sup> And there is a scholarly tradition of comparing shifts in party “forms” (for instance, from “mass” to “cartel” parties).<sup>19</sup> The “career” approach to studying organizations is also evident in the social movement literature.<sup>20</sup>

The concept of a group career suggests at least some organizational change over time. It is hard to imagine that a long-lived group will survive by simply maintaining the shape of its initial formation. Lengthy group careers will likely develop because groups adapt their initial forms to new and changing circumstances. As straightforward as this proposition sounds, the challenge is to find a way to identify what form or shape a group takes at any particular point in time—a baseline for tracking changes over time. How can we know if and how a group has changed if we do not know what it used to be and what it is now?

### Organizational Form

How can we identify when a single group has changed as it moves through its “career” and describe the various ways in which groups are organized within populations? To address these questions, we utilize the term *organizational form*, a term that has a long and varied use in organizational studies.<sup>21</sup> Here, we define organizational form as the organizational configuration a group conforms to at any single point in time. To systematize our approach, we suggest that an organizational form at any moment manifests three broad components/layers: (1) organizational identity, (2) organizational features and strategies, and (3) technical settings. Not only is this a way to describe a group’s form at a given moment, but it also provides a language to describe changes over time. We assume that these components constitute levels at which group adaptive change can occur. Thus, change can be assessed over time both in terms of alterations to individual components and in the cumulative impact of these changes on overall group organizational form.

Let us elaborate on these components of form (see summary in Table 3.1). It is helpful to think of an interest group as having a broad identity that reflects its core purpose. Like people, groups ask themselves “Why are we here?” and “What should we be doing?” One way to think about this is in terms of what the group stands for—its mission. We can discern a group’s identity from its public statements to key audiences of policy makers and supporters (members and patrons). This fits with recent work arguing that groups aspire to, and proactively cultivate, their own unique identities.<sup>22</sup> An identity is not a statement of what a group actually does. Rather, it is a statement about what a group purports or promises to do. As will become clear, aspirations may often be somewhat disconnected from strategies and technical settings; that is, promises often lag behind practices. A group communicates its aspirations through its name, its promotional material, and its public proclamations. We restrict our definition of identity to what the *leadership* of the group wants or claims it to be rather than the views or interpretations of others, such as policy makers or members. Although an identity is often contested, we do not believe such alternative views should be incorporated into our definition of identity. Rather, at any time we see a *dominant* group identity. We further assume that we can then study efforts to change or challenge this identity. While each group will—much like people—have a unique identity, groups tend to develop some more or less

**Table 3.1** Group Organizational Form and Change

Change	Description	Examples of Change
First order [Technical settings]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Settings for organizational features</li> <li>• Technical approaches to implementing features</li> <li>• Means to achieve strategic purposes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop telemarketing program to recruit members.</li> <li>• Develop Web site.</li> <li>• Develop relationship marketing program.</li> <li>• Change annual general meeting (AGM) format.</li> <li>• Recruit new staff expertise.</li> </ul>
Second order [Organizational features and strategies]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy strategy</li> <li>• Resource acquisition strategy</li> <li>• Formal organizational structures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change from “outsider” to “insider” lobbying strategy.</li> <li>• Change from small member support to large donor support.</li> <li>• Expand constituency coverage.</li> <li>• Narrow policy area of interest.</li> </ul>
Third order [Organizational identity]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aim(s)</li> <li>• Mission</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change from advocacy to service delivery.</li> <li>• Change from representative-based focus to issue focus.</li> </ul>

common identities. Michael T. Heaney suggested that groups tend to pursue either an issue-based or a representative-based identity. In terms of aims, some groups focus primarily or solely on policy advocacy, while others lean heavily on service delivery, change “on the ground,” or broad “public education” and “awareness.”<sup>23</sup> In reality, most groups combine both foci, but Heaney found that groups tend to emphasize one over the other.

If identity is about mission or purpose, organizational features and strategies emerge in response to the question “How should we be organized to achieve our aims and mission?” Thus, organizational features and strategies refer to how a group organizes itself to serve its overall identity. Groups have an almost infinite number of features and strategies, such as recruiting staff, communicating, etc., but some are more crucial to group organization than others. Interest groups, by definition, are *formal* organizations engaged in two core tasks—mobilizing support and resources and engaging in advocacy activities. Therefore, a group’s most relevant organizational features and strategies include (1) the pursuit of policy influence, such as “outside” or “inside” lobbying strategies; (2) the generation of the financial support and human resources needed to survive; and (3) basic formal organizational structures, like the level of group centralization and reliance on professional staff.

On the first count, groups need to decide what style of lobbying to engage in. Should they pursue a “system-changing” stance and be critical of government? Or should they generally try to strike a pragmatic tone? A related consideration might be how narrowly or broadly to engage on policy issues. On the second count, groups have to decide how to procure the money they need to survive. Do they seek government funding or donations from a few large benefactors? Or do they try to build a large membership base? The third element emphasizes the structures of the group. As formal organizations, groups possess attributes such as the level of professional staffing and the hierarchy among suborganizational units.

While not dwelling upon them here, we could also focus on the precise technical settings associated with implementing the organizational features. For instance, once a group has built a mass supporter base as a method of obtaining resources, the issue of implementation remains—that is, the means by which supporters are recruited. For example, are they solicited via word of mouth, through newspaper appeals, through e-mail campaigns, or by professional recruiters? These types of micro settings can change frequently. Micro settings also reflect the tactics a group uses in a specific policy battle. To wit, should the group engage in litigation or try to mobilize a grassroots consumer boycott? This level of detail is difficult to identify in population level studies and thus is best reserved for case studies (see below).

As for changes in these three components of organizational form, we hypothesize that altering identity is the most difficult. A group might seek



to emphasize one or another *facet* of its identity—perhaps to emphasize, say, representativeness one day and issue expertise the next—but we do not see much evidence that a group can shift its *overall* organizational identity often or quickly. When a group shifts its reason for being—for example, from being a service provider to a mass membership advocacy group—it does so over time, not all at once. What about changes in organizational features and strategies and technical settings? Do they affect a group’s identity? We hypothesize that changes in lower tiers will mostly occur without any impact on identity. For instance, a group may update member recruitment using new Web-based technologies, but doing so will not affect its basic reason for being. In short, we suggest that a hierarchy of change exists. But much empirical analysis is required to uphold this hunch.

The two concepts we introduce here—group career and organizational form—are valuable heuristic devices that we can use to study group change and adaptation. The concept of organizational form focuses our attention on the configuration in which a group survives at any single point in time. With this concept comes language we can use to start describing individual groups and how they change over time. We surmise that most changes in form are minor in nature—that is, they involve variations in strategies and/or technical settings. Changes in identity are more infrequent. In our formulation, a group career consists of strings of changes in a group’s organizational form. By studying individual group careers, we can learn more about how, to what extent, and to what effect, groups change.

### Implementing the Approach

In this section, we develop some illustrative vignettes to demonstrate that ours is a worthwhile approach to learning about interest group behavior. Specifically, we will present several mini case studies of organizations that have changed over the course of their careers. These will show our basic approach in action. In addition, they will demonstrate that the approach can help us understand the general processes of group maintenance and survival.

#### Variation in Organizational Form among Groups in the Same Population

The thrust of this chapter would be unnecessary if groups within the same population were homogenous in their form. But we know that this is not the case. Empirical studies have shown that groups within the same population respond differently to the same circumstances. One does not have to dig far to find groups in the same population that are organized differently. Consider, for example, organizations representing blind persons in the United Kingdom.<sup>24</sup> By the mid-twentieth century, three major national organizations of or for the blind existed. First, the British and Foreign Blind

Association (BFBA) was formed in the late 1800s by wealthy blind persons to seek better life conditions for the blind by providing them with embossed literature. The group admitted nonblind persons as supporters and never actively sought to represent the blind so much as to work *for* them.

Second, the National League of the Blind and Disabled (NLBD) was established in 1899 as a trade union for blind and disabled workers (associate membership was allowed for partially sighted workers). Increasing numbers of blind persons gained employment within sheltered workshops, and the League organized these new workers.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, almost half a century later, the National Federation of the Blind of the United Kingdom (the “Federation”) was established as a direct membership organization. It pursued membership among blind people who worked in white-collar and professional roles, a constituency for whom the League’s industrial role was less relevant. In common with the League, it had a strong face-to-face branch structure. Both the League and the Federation were constructed from birth as representative organizations of the blind for the blind. Moreover, both organizations were strongly opposed to the preponderance of sighted persons on bodies governing their welfare, believing that such people could not be as committed to the cause as the blind themselves.<sup>26</sup>

Together, the basic backgrounds of these three groups indicate that the condition of blind persons during the period in question did not in and of itself seem to recommend a particular type of organizational form. The groups took three distinct forms.

Other populations of groups provide further support for the notion that different groups within the same population take different forms. For example, in their seminal work on US policy change, Baumgartner and Jones identified all citizen groups listed in the *Encyclopedia of Associations* published by Gale Research as active on environmental issues.<sup>27</sup> The population of groups they described is large and amazingly diverse. To show the variety of organizational forms present in the population of environmental groups, they contrasted the American Phytopathological Society with the Sierra Club. The former is a professional association of plant scientists with a primary focus on public education, while the latter is a citizen group that emphasizes aggressive political advocacy. In short, even within the same broad group populations, individual groups can have very different identities and forms.

### Formation: The Importance of Establishing a Group’s Organizational Form

To understand how a group changes form over time, it is necessary to discover how the group established itself initially—that is, to understand the form it took at birth. Establishing this baseline organizational form for a

group under study provides us with a reference point for examining change over time.

The early years of group life are often characterized by jousting over the basic purpose of a group. In short, group identity is not “given”; it needs to be *formed* or chosen. For example, the Soil Association, a UK organization formed by proponents of organic farming in 1946, was established with at least three stated purposes in mind: (1) public education, (2) scientific inquiry, and (3) farmer knowledge exchange. The report of the first annual meeting records the resignation of one founder over the crystallizing view that the group should be about public education and admit the broader public—not just organic farmers—into membership. The founder in question strongly preferred that the group establish an identity as a traditional amateur scientific society distributing homespun experimental results to its constituent organic farmer members. But other founders had a different vision.

In all cases, a choice has to be made about group identity at inception. But this choice is often contested and subject to internal political processes and debate. In the Soil Association case, a choice of becoming a scientific society, for example, would have implied local branch structure; scientific content in the group’s published materials; and the maintenance of its research farm, which was donated to the group by its founder in 1945 and sold in 1982. But out of a lengthy formative period when various alternatives were jousting for dominance a different identity and form crystallized, secured by strong early leadership.<sup>28</sup> The group chose a secretariat of well-seasoned environmental campaigners and established a media staff. It organized so as to attract the attention of and engage with the broader British public, rather than primarily aggregating and representing the interests of organic farmers. Today most members are nonfarmers, and no branch system was ever developed. The recruitment of members increasingly relied on direct marketing, with appeals emphasizing incentives such as magazines, reductions on insurance, and similar packages of selective goods.

The broad point here is that students of groups will be less likely to take it for granted that groups have always existed as currently organized if they look first at group origins. The Soil Association is a modern, resource-rich, professionally staffed and led environmental citizens group. But it took this form only after several decades of battles over its “proper” identity. It is also worth noting that a group’s organizational form has real and important implications for its policy behavior. In its current incarnation, the Soil Association lobbies for consumers and the soil rather than for the sectoral interests of professional organic farmers.

### Radical Change: Shifts in Identity

Interest group scholars are especially interested in the most radical changes in organizational form. Aside from their intrinsic interest, such case studies

also provide broad insights into group maintenance and survival, as can be seen in the following two instances of identity shifts.

*The Australian Conservation Foundation.* The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) is a group that underwent radical identity change. The ACF commenced life as a “semi-scientific body” of prestigious scientists working in academia and government.<sup>29</sup> From its inception, the group had active annual general meetings and contested elections for a board, which then set the group’s strategic direction. Beginning in the early 1980s, the group started pursuing a more radical “green” agenda; it engaged explicitly in political advocacy, including federal-level electioneering, and opened its membership to the mass public. In the latest period (1985–present), John Warhurst explained that the ACF appointed a lawyer as director and a rock star as its president (Peter Garret from Midnight Oil). In short, the organization for senior scientists had transformed itself into a mass affiliation group that pursued an environmental agenda through political advocacy.

The ACF started life as a group of professional ecologists concerned with the environment. Its legitimacy arose from the democratically derived view of its professional membership. Today it actively seeks a mass supporter base, which in turn will illustrate to government that a broad public views the environment as a high priority. Warhurst noted that while “the culture of the organization is participative . . . the leadership has tended to overshadow the membership.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the ACF itself now talks of supporters and volunteers; its Web site does not explicitly show how a member can influence the group’s decisions.

That the ACF has fundamentally changed its overall form is beyond dispute. The change is not only important in its own right, but it also has implications for how the group behaves politically. In its early years, the ACF was a good reference point for scientifically formulated positions on conservation. This nonpolitical identity provided the group with a certain credibility, but it precluded the group from engaging in overt political advocacy and mobilizing mass membership for causes. The endorsement of the current ACF of policy proposals is less about attaching a veneer of scientific respectability and more about confirming widespread societal support.

*The Royal Institute for Blind People.* The case of the ACF shows that radical shifts in purpose are not unheard of. This is an exciting finding in and of itself, and it is consistent with work in the social movement literature that shows how voluntary sector groups move among advocacy, service provision, and representation.<sup>31</sup> But precisely *how* does radical change come about?

To illustrate how our approach can help us understand such change, we will briefly examine the case of the Royal Institute for Blind People (RNIB). The RNIB was founded in 1868 as the British and Foreign Society for Improving Embossed Literature for the Blind. The group was established

by a group of wealthy blind men as a benevolent organization that primarily developed written materials and offered rehabilitation services for the blind, and the group championed the use of the Braille system in printed materials. Since its formation the group has undergone five name changes.<sup>32</sup> Appraised from a contemporary viewpoint, the group has undergone a significant change from its initial form. Specifically, the RNIB has evolved from being a provider of services to the blind in the tradition of philanthropic benevolence to an overtly political organization representing the blind before government. A brief look at the group's last ten years shows how this change took place.

The past decade has been a momentous one for the RNIB. In 2002, the group announced a series of organizational changes. Most important, the group decided to affiliate the blind into direct membership. Since 2002, the group has offered "full membership" to those who are blind and partially sighted. Essentially, the group became an organization *of* the blind and partially sighted rather than just *for* the blind and partially sighted, changing its rules to reserve a majority of spots on its governing body for the blind and partially sighted.<sup>33</sup> This significant alteration from the group's origins would be expected to have major effects on other organizational features. In short, the RNIB has changed from advocating for the blind to organizing the blind to advocate for themselves. The RNIB of the early twenty-first century is not the same organization that it was in the late nineteenth century. But how can we articulate this change? The group's own claim of momentous change is not disputed. But the question is whether or not the *process* of change conforms to the image conveyed by the group's own reportage of a one-off "decision" or whether it was the result of incremental adaptations over several decades.

Close inspection of the group's history suggests that there was no single moment of rapid and radical change. Changes were made by the group's governing body and formalized in the group's Royal Charter and bylaws in 2001. But the notion that this resulted from a short period of rapid and comprehensive change is erroneous. The most recent name change—from the Royal National Institute of the Blind to the Royal National Institute of Blind People (2007)—is the symbolic "cherry on the cake" in terms of demarcating change for the group. The historical record suggests that this final change was the accretion of decades of smaller modifications and, further, was made possible by precedents and decisions made half a century beforehand.

A convenient empirical indicator of the extent to which this radical change has been realized in RNIB practice is the percentage of blind persons in the main decision-making organ of the group. Fortunately, RNIB annual reports allow us to track how this number has changed over the

years.<sup>34</sup> This statistic provides a proxy measure of the distance traveled between the two points—the extent to which the “new” representational organizational identity has been realized (see Table 3.2).

As background, it is important to know a few historical facts about the governance of the RNIB. Prior to the 1920s, for almost sixty years, the RNIB was run by a group of mostly blind men.<sup>35</sup> Working for the group was a purely voluntary endeavor. The roots of the contemporary reforms to the RNIB regarding blind representation can be traced back to developments in 1925–1926, 1931, and 1937. These successive and tightly bound waves of reform altered its composition and thus its internal politics. As government started to take over care for the blind in the early 1900s, the RNIB came under pressure to share its substantial fundraising wealth with local charitable organizations and local government. The British government proposed a national body be established to achieve coordination, and it suggested the RNIB assume this mantle. The group did so, but in return it had to allocate representation on its council to member organizations from local government and other organizations of and for the blind. In essence, the National Institute for the Blind (NIB), as it was then, became a group of groups. This change in internal governing structure did *not* change the group’s overall identity, as it retained its focus on delivering services to the blind.

Returning to group evolution, the share of blind persons in the RNIB’s governing body provides an indicator of the distance traveled from its initial form as a benevolent group to its current form as a group representing blind persons directly. As Table 3.2 illustrates, the percentage of blind persons within the council has varied over time but has grown incrementally over the past half century. The major outcome of the 2001 reform process was a constitutional guarantee that governance structures would have a blind majority. In fact, blind persons have constituted a majority since the 1980s.

Interviews with former leaders reveal that blind persons *within* the organization sought, and won, successive reforms to the group’s constitution to convert the RNIB into an unofficial representative group of the blind. In short, to take the 2001 reforms and name change as the tipping

**Table 3.2** Composition of Executive Council of RNIB 1966–2001, Selected Years

	1966	1971	1975	1980	1986	1996	2001
Total	100	105	120	115	93	111	117
% blind*	20	26	40	45	58	65	65

*Source:* Royal National Institute of Blind People, *Annual Report* [Various years] (London: Royal National Institute of Blind People).

point in the evolution of the RNIB would be to miss a great deal. Moreover, a great deal of first- and second-order change went on without immediately undermining or directly challenging the RNIB's philanthropic form. Slow, adaptive, yet significant change added up to transformative change.

Again, the shift in group organizational form has implications for what the group can do in public policy. The RNIB went from being a benevolent organization to one with representative legitimacy. This enabled it politically to represent the blind—to voice the interests of blind persons—not simply to show solidarity with them or to help them.

### Minor Change Consistent with Established Identity: Organizational Features, Strategies, and Technical Settings

Rapid and frequent change of identity is rarely easy, and for most groups maintenance involves changing organizational features and strategies or only technical settings *within* an overarching identity. In short, organizational forms evolve most often through nonradical change that retains overall identity.

*Change among Homosexual Rights Interest Groups in the United States.* In 1980, veteran gay rights advocate Steve Endean founded the Human Rights Campaign Fund (HRCF). The group, which excised “Fund” from its name in 1995, is now a gay rights advocacy behemoth. It boasts 700,000 members and annual revenues of over \$20 million. According to its official history, “Ever since its founding in 1980, HRC has led the way in promoting fairness for GLBT [gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender] Americans.”<sup>36</sup> This declaration is a bit of an overstatement for it obscures the fact that HRC did not add the words *transgender* and *bisexual* to its mission statement until 2001. The case of the HRC is not unusual. Over the past fifteen years, one by one, most (but not all) American gay and/or lesbian organizations have expanded their boundaries to encompass the interests of transgender individuals. Within the GLBT community this is known as “adding the T.” For example, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) “added the T” in 1998, while both the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) and the National Center for Lesbian Rights did so in 1996. No definitive and thorough study has been done on this topic. As part of a different project, however, we chose eighteen nationally active, American gay and/or lesbian rights interest groups at random and found that between 1995 and 2004, all but one (the lone holdout was the right-leaning Log Cabin Republicans) had broadened their missions to encompass the interests and issues of transgender individuals.<sup>37</sup>

Scholars disagree over precisely why so many gay and/or lesbian rights groups expanded their boundaries in the 1990s and 2000s. Our own research

suggests that gay and lesbian rights groups chose to expand their boundaries and reach out to a new constituency to compete with newly prominent transgender interest groups such as the National Transgender Advocacy Coalition, the Transgender Law and Policy Institute, and the National Center for Transgender Equality; in other words, groups changed to enter a new market and garner new resources from members and patrons. Other scholars disagree, citing more idealistic reasons.

Scholarly debates notwithstanding, the facts concerning organizational change speak for themselves. During a ten- to fifteen-year period, the population of gay and/or lesbian rights interest groups in the United States underwent substantial change. This change, however, did not take place at the overall population level, where PE scholars focus their attention. Rather, it took place among groups *within* the population. Groups of all shapes and sizes expanded their boundaries and reached out to a new constituency. In short, the case of the population of gay and/or lesbian rights interest groups provides overwhelming empirical evidence that second-order change among interest groups is not uncommon. In fact, in this population second-order change was the rule rather than the exception. There are now close to 100 nationally active homosexual rights interest groups in the United States.<sup>38</sup> Over the past fifteen years, one by one, most (but not all) of them have expanded their boundaries to encompass the interests of transgender individuals

*The Federation of Small Businesses.* The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) in the United Kingdom has undergone substantial change. Its identity, however, has never changed—it is and always has been a group organizing small businesspersons and representing their interests before government. Since its establishment in 1974, the organization has intermittently revised and “upgraded” its policy strategies and recruitment strategies. In its initial formation phase, the FSB (then called the National Federation of the Self Employed, NFSE) recruited members through personal contacts, and its policy stance emphasized a belligerent pursuit of policy goals. The early success of the group faded as the founding issue of National Insurance charges for small businesses receded. Starting in 1990, while the largely activist-led and outsider-style influence strategy continued, recruitment became professionalized, and the group developed into a mass membership organization predicated on selective incentives.<sup>39</sup> Associated with this transformation, the FSB shifted its policy strategy. Specifically, it began pursuing a more “insider” approach and moderating its tone and tactics.<sup>40</sup>

To summarize, in the early 1990s, after sixteen years of “outsider” policy advocacy accompanied by a disjointed and amateurish approach to member recruitment, the FSB shifted its strategy and technical settings related to exercising insider influence and maximizing support from



potential members. The group changed without altering its basic identity. The group remains a representative advocacy group for British small businesspeople.

### Addressing Other Questions

Understanding group adaptive change is important in its own right. But the approach we champion here allows scholars to weigh in on other important questions. Consider, for example, the ongoing debate about the democratic properties of contemporary interest groups. Recently some influential scholars have claimed that many previously democratic groups have begun to jettison participatory democratic structures and replace them with more professionalized “top-down” group structures.<sup>41</sup> Other scholars argue that many groups retain democratic properties and that the “professionalization of advocacy” thesis is incorrect.<sup>42</sup> In our parlance, the debate is over whether or not large numbers of groups are shifting from a participative organizational form to a more elite-driven form. By recourse to our basic framework, which posits that there are levels of change in form, we can begin to unpack how such change might manifest itself.

In the United Kingdom, much has been written about the propensity of contemporary citizen groups, particularly environmental ones, to adopt a form whereby they are supported by a remote membership base consisting of individuals who are enrolled through direct marketing and who each contribute small amounts to the group. Jordan and Maloney used the term “protest business” to describe these kinds of groups.<sup>43</sup> Students of interest groups might ask, Is a shift in this direction a shift in organizational form? Our approach allows us to address this question. Here we will briefly three UK citizen groups: (1) the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), (2) Oxfam UK, and (3) the National Trust (NT). Each of these groups is more than sixty years old, being created in 1889, 1942, and 1895, respectively. Each group has had to adapt in some way to survive for so long. Each operates within the UK environment and conservation policy field. And all broadly share a similar organizational form; specifically, each is an issue-based advocacy group lobbying to protect the environment. They also employ “insider” lobbying tactics, utilize expertise and science to support their case, and rely financially on large and relatively remote/passive mass membership bases. In short, each of these groups is the prototypical “protest business” group.<sup>44</sup>

All three of these groups have come to scholarly attention because of their rapid post-1990s growth in membership. The RSPB, for instance, now has over a million members, compared to 475,000 in 1985. Research has attributed this increase in membership to the group’s recent deployment of modern membership-marketing techniques and merchandizing. The adoption of innovative techniques, such as “direct-debit” payment methods,

direct mail solicitation, the employment of professional performance-paid recruiters, and canvassing of “warm” leads through database mining, have led to membership increases and more income.

Each of these groups did indeed have a formative period in which it was the subject of the intense participative efforts of a small number of group entrepreneurs. For instance, the RSPB was formed by a small band of women who objected to the use of plumage from rare birds in women’s hats.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Oxfam started during the Second World War as the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief and, like many similar committees of its time, was run by a handful of local notables, such as church leaders and academics. The National Trust was formed by a small number of upper-class individuals, who were at first resistant to any mass membership.<sup>46</sup> Yet in short order each of these groups morphed into what is best described as an early “protest business.” For example, by the 1920s, the NT started soliciting mass membership, and it formed a membership department in the 1940s. Similarly, only five years after its formation, Oxfam began to employ innovative business techniques to raise money. Specifically, it began selling gifts through a storefront and soliciting support through media campaigns. In the 1960s, the group adopted a “pledged gift” system whereby people were cold-canvassed at their doors to pledge support for Oxfam and provide a donation.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, by the end of the 1940s, the RSPB was offering its members rewards for recruiting other members and soon after produced a RSPB shopping catalog from which members could purchase merchandise.

These three cases show that the practices adopted by these groups and widely associated with “protest businesses” are consistent with each group’s long-standing group identity. In other words, one lesson here is that a group that innovates by turning to direct-debit and online cold canvassing is not necessarily changing its identity or even adopting a new strategy. Rather, it is adopting a new technique in support of its long-standing strategy of fostering a passive mass supporter base, remote from leaders.

These cases illustrate the following general point: in some cases, a group changes its organizational form without changing its identity. While it is true, for instance, that in the early 1990s both Oxfam and RSPB turned to paid recruiters to increase membership (an example of strategic change) and to direct-debit instruments to maintain membership (an example of technical innovation), these changes were consistent with the long-established identity of both groups as growth-oriented mass membership organizations that used innovative business practices eschewed by many other nonprofits.<sup>48</sup> The changes of the 1990s were important, but they did not change each organization’s identity. Instead, the changes were of a lower order and confirmed each group’s commitment to its founding identity. Each of these groups was committed to a protest business identity *very early* in its history. Thus, the contemporary changes noted by some scholars<sup>49</sup> and normatively criticized by others<sup>50</sup> reflect strategic and technical variations

that did not undercut a long-standing commitment to a particular group identity. Another way to put this is that each group's history suggests that it would surely have used direct debits and advanced database management linked to mail shots in its earliest days if it had the opportunity to do so. Each group has consistently utilized the equivalent member marketing technologies of its day. Thus, survival for these groups has been about low-order change—updating techniques and settings—rather than high-order identity change.

## Conclusion

Interest group scholars have given a great deal of attention over the years to questions of organizational formation. This is understandable, in that new groups are the raw material that forge group populations and communities. But not all groups that successfully form are able to survive. This fact has led us to ask, What changes, if any, do groups make in order to survive? We believe that questions like this are important. Answering them will allow us to understand why we have the interest group community we do rather than some other we might imagine. Addressing such questions will also allow us better to understand group behavior.

Our overarching purpose here has been to outline a basic approach to studying interest group maintenance. First, we introduce the concepts of *group career* and *organizational form*. Neither of these concepts is novel, as each has been used previously by scholars (primarily in other fields). We argue that deploying these concepts can help us understand the postformation trajectories of interest groups.

Second, we attempt to show how these concepts can be deployed to understand group adaptive change over time. Specifically, we present several small case studies of organizational change. We believe that the case studies are valuable both substantively and demonstratively. First, they demonstrate that groups do indeed change over time. They also show *how* groups change over time. Second, the case studies are small-scale exemplars of the type of research we believe should be undertaken. Together, our case studies allow us to reach a number of conclusions about group adaptive change. While group formation continues to attract more scholarly attention than group maintenance, we believe it is time to give maintenance its scholarly due.

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